

## PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING THE BLENDED COMMENT TO THE FOREST PLAN

### Introduction

Immediately upon the unveiling of the White River National Forest Preferred Alternative, Alternative D, Congressman McInnis received a tremendous amount of input from a broad range of people interested in and impacted by the management of what is one of the nation's largest and oldest forests, as well as one of the top forests in the country for recreation and wilderness.

The input centered on four principle concerns with the direction of Alternative D, which envisions that a "higher priority be given to physical and biological resources than to human uses of the Forest." (*Summary of the Draft EIS, p.14*). These concerns focused on four primary topics –

- 1) the attempt to circumvent Colorado's well-established water system,
- 2) a failure to recognize the diversity of the Forest,
- 3) the potential negative impact on the mountain economy, and
- 4) an unbalanced emphasis on very limited uses at the expense of multiple use and the historic mission of the Forest.

The initial action taken by Congressman McInnis was to request an extension of the period for comment on the Forest Plan. It was immediately apparent that the time and effort it would take to fully digest and offer meaningful comments to the Forest Plan would require additional time beyond the original time period set. The Congressman requested, and the Forest agreed to extend the comment period. The comment period was again extended by Senator Campbell to the current date of May 9, 2000. This additional time was required to fully allow the large constituency of the White River National Forest to comment about the Forest Plan.

Because of these concerns, Congressman McInnis felt a theme of Forest use and Forest rest was in order and sought out local input from the communities as to how to bring a more common sense approach to the Forest Plan: this Plan would seek a balance between use of the Forest while properly protecting the resources of the Forest. It is in the interest of the Congressman and the Third District to work toward making a positive contribution to the Forest management and not take an adversarial position. First, Congressman McInnis sought out the expertise of Richard Woodrow, former Forest Supervisor for the White River National Forest. Mr. Woodrow managed the White River National Forest when the current forest plan was drafted, served as the Assistant to the Director for Recreation in Washington D.C., and is an acknowledged expert on the Forest. Mr. Woodrow brought with him a widely acknowledged breadth of expertise regarding the Forest.

## **Water**

Water is an area and issue that is non-negotiable to the Congressman: the federal government must respect Colorado's process. As a result, Congressman McInnis sought out the expertise of the Colorado River Conservancy District to provide professional input on the appropriate way that the Forest should deal on issues of water in Colorado. Water in Colorado is of paramount importance, and the Colorado system of water rights is among the most developed in the country, if not the world. The Colorado River Conservancy District contributed the language indicating that the Forest should operate as part of the Colorado water system and not try to circumvent that established state process for instream water flows. The Congressman is firm in his position that the federal government not circumvent, ignore or preempt Colorado law that applies evenly to all Colorado water users.

## **Community Input**

The Congressman also sought out input from sources on the ground, the county and local communities who live on and around the Forest. These are the communities most directly impacted by decisions made about the future of the Forest. Counties, including Eagle, Garfield, Mesa, Pitkin, Rio Blanco and Summit, were invited to submit their own county-specific information about the distinct management of the Forest and how the Forest Service could work in conjunction with the communities in which the Forest is located. Each of the counties responded as the county deemed appropriate, including several counties that held numerous public meetings and developed complex comments of their own for incorporation in Congressman McInnis' blended alternative. For example, Summit County set up a number of public meetings to gather additional public input, and has put particular effort into finding an appropriate balance especially in sensitive forest/urban intermix, a prescription that was not addressed in Alternative D.

What is paramount here is that each county represents a very different set of management prescriptions; Rio Blanco County has a very different set of issues than Summit County, and those differences should be considered when setting out the way the Forest will be managed. A corollary to that point is that each community within the counties has different concerns. The Forest Plan should be a vehicle to bring communities and interests together, and a process that is driven from the ground up is a means toward achieving a Forest Plan that unifies.

A wide range of input was provided to Congressman McInnis, including taking into consideration what represents a complete set of recommendations from environmental groups in the form of Alternative I. This process was ongoing through the entire comment period, and continued right up until this Blended Alternative was submitted in May. Meetings to outline the county-by-county prescriptions and materials continued to take place in dozens of communities before the final version is submitted in May, with input being taken and translated into a

## PROCESS OR DEVELOPING THE BLENDED COMMENT TO THE FOREST PLAN

Forest Plan that provides management sensitive to the differing communities that make up the White River National Forest. Unlike the perception of the Forest Service meetings, where some citizens came away with the feeling that Alternative D as the preferred alternative was not open to amendment or change, these meetings were intended to solicit additional input and changes were subsequently made based on the input of the meetings with communities.

A partial list of the communities and elected officials to whom staff presented briefings and/or sought input on the Blended Alternative in either direct meetings or through meetings of intergovernmental organizations includes:

### Eagle County

- Avon
- Gypsum
- Minturn, Redcliff invited
- Town of Vail

### Garfield County

- Basalt
- Carbondale
- Glenwood Springs
- Rifle
- Silt

### Mesa County

### Moffat County

### Pitkin County

- Aspen

### Rio Blanco County

- Meeker

### Summit County

- Dillon
- Breckenridge
- Frisco
- Silverthorne

## **Economy**

The communities in and around the Forest, as well as those who live in those communities, are directly tied to the Forest economically. Recreation (skiing, rafting, mountain biking, hiking, hunting and many other activities) provides at least

35,000 jobs directly, the Forest Service indicates recreation provides \$721 million annually to the local economy. Through the operation of the economic multiplier in the communities, the Forest provides employment to thousands more living in the mountains. For example, the direct impact of jobs providing rafting opportunities to visitors is the income paid to employees of the rafting company. That income is then, in turn, spent by those employees in the local economy. Employees of restaurants, stores, and a myriad of other businesses derive their income from the Forest and the money spent there.

Congressman McInnis incorporated the concerns about how to manage the Forest so as to respect the amount of economic support the Forest provides surrounding communities. A management plan that ignores the importance of recreation to these communities' and families' economies by relegating multiple use to secondary consideration does not serve either the Forest or the communities.

### **Balanced Approach to Multiple Use**

Congressman McInnis heard concerns that the approach the preferred alternative, Alternative D, took ignored the traditional diversity of uses for which the Forest was historically managed. For many generations, the Forest has been a hub of outdoor activity, attracting recreation and nature enthusiasts from throughout the United States and the world. Moreover, the signs that welcome a visitor to the White River National Forest read "Welcome to the White River National Forest -- Land of Many Uses." The National Forest Management Act specifically calls for a policy of multiple use in management plans under, specifically stating:

"[in developing, maintaining and revising plans for units of the National Forest System pursuant to this section, the Secretary shall assure such plans – (1) provide for multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services obtained therefrom in accordance with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 [16 U.S.C.A. §§528-531], and, in particular, include coordination of outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness." (16 U.S.C.A. § 1604(e)).

Alternative D inadequately balanced this fundamental consideration for the management of the Forest. In contrast, the policy of multiple use on the Forest is carried throughout the Blended Plan. It is important to remember that multiple use does not mean that the federal land which makes up the Forest will somehow be lost; in fact the Forest Service will apply rigorous management standards to the Forest and through those prescriptive management standards and guidelines can ensure the Forest is managed in a way to ensure it is available to current and future generations. The Congressman believes people have the right to use the Forest but have no right to abuse the Forest.

One third of the White River National Forest is designated as wilderness, which is a very limited and narrow management prescription. The other two thirds of the Forest is managed by the Forest to serve a variety of goals, but the Forest will remain available and accessible to future generations to pursue outdoor recreation and a multitude of activities in balance with the Forest. The Blended Plan more fully reflects the Forest's time-honored multiple use values.

### **A Decision of Conscience, Not Convenience**

It is clear that the most politically expedient choice available to Congressman McInnis would have been to sit on the sidelines, offering only criticism of Alternative D without seeking a positive solution. Indeed, Congressman McInnis has been the subject of intense personal criticism from individuals on both extremes of this debate. Instead, this Blended Alternative reflects a positive attempt at finding a more balanced way to manage the Forest. Rather than offering criticism alone, Congressman McInnis' Blended Alternative offers both constructive feedback and a balanced management plan geared toward compromise. This Blended Comment reflects a tougher choice to enter the arena with a positive alternative and the enormous effort that such an undertaking entails.

### **Acknowledgments**

This Blended Comment, submitted by Congressman McInnis, includes contributions and reflects comments by a large number of groups and individuals whose expertise provided the on-the-ground input. This Blended Comment was built from the ground up, including direct input offered by communities, groups and concerned individuals.

In addition to the large number of local communities who offered comments and input, the following individuals and groups deserve acknowledgment for their contributions, comments and input:

Speaker of the Colorado House, Russell George  
State Senator Dave Wattenberg  
State Representative Diane Hoppe

Club 20	NW Colo. Council of Governments
Associated Governments of NW Colorado	
Colorado Counties, Inc.	Colorado Big Country
Colorado River Conservancy Dist.	Colorado Water Congress

## PROCESS OR DEVELOPING THE BLENDED COMMENT TO THE FOREST PLAN

Finally, staff from Congressman McInnis' office attended the following Forest Service Open Houses to discuss the Forest Plan, and received input during those meetings:

Carbondale	Denver
Eagle	Frisco
Glenwood Springs	Grand Junction
Meeker	Rifle
Vail/Avon	

The Blended Alternative is a result of collaborative efforts by literally hundreds, if not more, individuals and groups and local and county governments to produce a comment and an alternative which has support at the local community level. By working with local communities, from the ground up, the Blended Alternative brings with it the involved commitment of those local communities who helped shape the comment. In that way, the Blended Plan should serve to bring the community together.